

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTU #1175/01 3261318
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 211318Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5759
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0493
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0090

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 001175

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG (NARDI/HAYES)
DRL (JOHNSTONE/KLARMAN) AND IO/UNP
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/21/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL UN TS
SUBJECT: INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS SEEK HELP IN
INFLUENCING GOT

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) PolOffs met with representatives of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on November 17 and 18. Both organizations echoed a common complaint in the diplomatic community: the GOT does not share information, restricts travel, and limits access to public and private institutions. They asked for the Embassy's assistance in urging the GOT to upgrade the UNHCR's diplomatic status, and also explored joint-sponsorship of economic and human rights projects. End Summary.

GOT Drags Feet in Recognizing UNHCR

¶2. (C) On November 19, PolOffs met with two UNHCR representatives to discuss cooperation and the UNHCR's diplomatic quandary. The organization is in the process of trying to establish a North African hub in Tunisia, mostly because it can't go anywhere else. Substantive issues prevent the UNHCR from establishing an office in Morocco, and Algeria and Libya are considered too unstable. The proposed regional hub is part of an EU initiative aimed at strengthening refugee protection during migratory movements by unifying mixed migration policy for refugees and asylum seekers. Establishing a regional office is complicated because the UNHCR only has Honorary Representational Status in Tunisia, initially granted in 1963. The UNHCR has been trying to get full diplomatic status for over a year, but has had no success to date. Accreditation is also a high priority for the UNHCR's High Commissioner, who visited Tunisia in September and raised the issue with the Foreign Minister.

¶3. (C) The GOT's response so far has been that it is examining the issue closely, and will respond once its review is complete. There has been no response to the draft agreement the UNHCR shared with the GOT. The head of UNHCR's local office Sara Baschetti and Regional Project Coordinator Ann Maymann said that 2009 would be &key year8 because the money that would fund the establishment of a regional office expires in 2009. If there is no movement on this issue the UNHCR might decide to instead strengthen its presence in Beirut or Cairo where it already has offices. Still, Baschetti and Maymann stressed that they attached no deadlines on the proposal when talking to the Tunisians, though the High Commissioner did tell Foreign Minister

Abdallah that he would like to see a final decision by next summer.

So You Want to Work in Tunisia

¶4. (C) UNHCR noted that it gets about 100 foreign asylum seekers per year, and speculated that there might be additional asylum seekers who are arrested before reaching the UNHCR's offices. As the UNHCR has no access to detention centers, it has no way of ascertaining the facts. Baschetti and Maymann said that they had requested GOT meetings to discuss these issues, but diplomatic notes sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through which all meetings must be arranged, were frequently met with silence. They asked for the Embassy's assistance in addressing these issues. PolOffs said the Embassy would need to discuss their concerns, but in the meantime proposed that the UNHCR contact members of the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally's (RCD) Central Committee. As some of the Central Committee members are not members of the government, meetings with them do not require a diplomatic note.

¶5. (C) The UNHCR Representatives acknowledged the numbers of migrants through Tunisia are low, though they added that this makes migration an area in which Tunisia could take the lead and shine by developing and implementing legislation protecting the rights of migrants and refugees (as well as being the home of a regional hub). The UNHCR has also asked the European Union Commissioner to casually raise the issue of accreditation, which he agreed to do.

IOM Open to Cooperation

¶6. (C) The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has similar concerns to the UNHCR. PolOff met with Marc Petzoldt of the IOM on November 18. Petzoldt shared many of the same frustrations as other members of the diplomatic community, namely an inability to get meetings with government officials, excessive red tape, and strict controls on movement inside the country. Petzoldt, who said he had previously worked in Sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan, and Iraq, said that Tunisia was easily the most restrictive regime he had encountered.

¶7. (C) According to Petzoldt, the IOM's current project is a publicity campaign about the dangers of illegal immigration being developed in conjunction with an association closely affiliated with the Ministry of the Interior. The program was developed in response to a request by the GOT, thus Petzoldt said he is hopeful the IOM will be able to implement the final product. Still, Petzoldt acknowledged the possibility that the campaign might never see the light of day because the GOT is sometimes sensitive about issues that could put Tunisia in a negative light. Pending projects include plans to work with the government to improve the quality and accessibility of statistics relating to immigration and trafficking, and a proposal for the government to develop legislation protecting the rights of migrants. The IOM also helps illegal migrants in Tunisia return to their country of origin, though there are only approximately 50 of these cases each year.

¶8. (C) PolOffs also discussed potential joint-projects. The UNHCR has an ongoing vocational training initiative with local partners. As the IOM works on internal migration and health-related issues, Petzoldt said that his organization promotes general health-awareness and funds micro-credit and vocational programs in conjunction with local and government partners. The Embassy might be able to fund some of these projects through the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI).

Comment

¶9. (C) It is possible the UNCHR will not receive accreditation. Despite multiple attempts, the African Development Bank has still not managed to win full accreditation for its own staff. Lack of accreditation gives the GOT some leverage over the organizations in question, so that could be one possible motive for withholding accreditation. Another could simply be bureaucratic red tape because of a centralized structure where employees are not empowered to make decisions. Whatever the motivation, lack of accreditation will not help the GOT in its bid to paint itself as a regional player. The UN is rumored to be considering moving some administrative positions from Geneva to North Africa, but it is unlikely any jobs would be moved to Tunis if the GOT refuses to accredit UN agencies. End Comment.

Godec